

Loss of Communality at Buffalo Creek

BY KAI T. ERIKSON, PH.D.

The survivors of the Buffalo Creek disaster suffered both individual and collective trauma, the latter being reflected in their loss of communality. Human relationships in this community had been derived from traditional bonds of kinship and neighborliness. When forced to give up these long-standing ties with familiar places and people, the survivors experienced demoralization, disorientation, and loss of connection. Stripped of the support they had received from their community, they became apathetic and seemed to have forgotten how to care for one another. This was apparently a community that was stronger than the sum of its parts, and these parts—the survivors of the Buffalo Creek flood—are now having great difficulty finding the personal resources to replace the energy and direction they had once found in their community.

THE TRAUMA experienced by the survivors of the Buffalo Creek disaster can be conceptualized as having two related but distinguishable facets—the individual trauma and the collective trauma.

By individual trauma, I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such force that one cannot respond effectively. As the other papers in this section make abundantly clear, the Buffalo Creek survivors experienced just such a blow. They suffered deep shock as a result of their exposure to so much death and destruction, and they withdrew into themselves, feeling numbed, afraid, vulnerable, and very alone.

By collective trauma, I mean a blow to the tissues of social life that damages the bonds linking people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it; thus it does not have the quality of suddenness usually associated with the word "trauma." It is, however, a form of shock—a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as a source of nurturance and that a part of the self has disappeared. "I" continue to exist, although damaged and maybe even permanently changed. "You" continue to exist, al-

though distant and hard to relate to. But "we" no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body.

The two traumas are closely related, of course, but they are distinct in the sense that either of them can take place in the absence of the other. For instance, a person who suffers deep psychic wounds as the result of an automobile accident, but who never loses contact with his community, can be said to suffer from individual trauma. A person whose feelings of well-being begin to wither because the surrounding community is stripped away and no longer offers a base of support (as is known to have happened in certain slum clearance projects) can be said to suffer from collective trauma. In most large-scale human disasters, of course, the two traumas occur jointly and are experienced as two halves of a continuous whole. For the purposes of this paper, however, it is worthwhile to insist on the distinction at least briefly, partly because it alerts us to look for the degree to which the psychic impairment observed in settings like Buffalo Creek can be attributed to loss of communality, and partly because it underscores the point that it is difficult for people to recover from the effects of individual trauma when the community on which they have depended remains fragmented.

I am proposing, then, that many of the traumatic symptoms experienced by the people of Buffalo Creek are as much a reaction to the shock of being separated from a meaningful community base as to the actual disaster itself.

It should be noted that "community" means much more in Buffalo Creek than it does in most other parts of the United States. Much has been said in the literature on Appalachia about the importance of kinship and neighborliness in mountain society. Although it is true that coal camps like the ones along Buffalo Creek differ in many ways from the typical Appalachian community, the people of Buffalo Creek were nonetheless joined together in the close and intimate bonds that sociologists call *gemeinschaft*. The rhythms of everyday life were largely set by the community in general and governed by long-standing traditions, and the social linkages by which people were connected were very strong. In Buffalo Creek, tightly knit communal groups were considered the natural order of things, the envelope in which people live.

Long stories must be made short in a presentation like this, so I will simply summarize my theme by stating that the human communities along Buffalo Creek were essentially destroyed by the disaster and its after-

Presented at the 128th annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association, Anaheim, Calif., May 5-9, 1975.

Dr. Erikson is Professor of Sociology and Chair, American Studies Program, Yale University, New Haven, Conn. 06520.

math. The flood itself forced the residents of the hollow into a number of nearby refugee camps from which they were, for a variety of reasons, unable to escape. The result was that the majority of the Buffalo Creek survivors remained in the general vicinity of their old homes, working in familiar mines, traveling along familiar roads, trading in familiar stores, attending familiar schools, and sometimes worshipping in familiar churches. However, the people were scattered more or less at random throughout the vicinity—virtually stranded in the spots to which they had been washed by the flood—and this meant that old bonds of kinship and neighborhood, which had always depended on physical proximity, were effectively severed. People no longer related to one another in old and accustomed ways. The threads of the social fabric had snapped.

A year after the disaster (which is roughly when most of the authors represented in this section first encountered these people) visitors to Buffalo Creek were struck by a number of behavioral manifestations that seemed to be exhibited by almost everyone in the valley and, for that matter, continue to this day. Several of these manifestations are discussed elsewhere in this section. I would like to mention three by way of illustrating a larger point.

DEMORALIZATION

First, the survivors clearly suffer from a state of severe demoralization, both in the sense that they have lost much personal morale and in the sense that they have lost (or so they fear) most of their moral anchors.

The lack of morale is reflected in a profound apathy, a feeling that the world has more or less come to an end and that there are no longer any sound reasons for doing anything. People are drained of energy and conviction, not just because they are still stunned by the savagery of the flood but because activity of any kind seems to have lost much of its direction and purpose in the absence of a confirming community surround. They feel that the ground has been pulled out from under them, that the context in which they had worked, played, and cared for others has more or less disappeared. One survivor said,

I don't know. I just got to the point where I just more or less don't care. I don't have no ambition to do the things I used to do. I used to try to keep things up. But anymore I just don't. It seems I just do enough to get by, to make it last one more day. It seems like I just lost everything at once, like the bottom just dropped out of everything.

I suppose the clinical term for this state of mind would be depression, but one can hardly escape the impression that it is, at least in part, a reaction to the ambiguities of postdisaster life in the valley. The survivors are literally out of place and uprooted. They had never realized the extent to which they relied on the

rest of the community to reflect a sense of security and well-being, or how much they depended on others to supply them with a point of reference.

The people of Buffalo Creek are also haunted by a suspicion that moral standards are beginning to collapse all over the valley, and in some ways it would appear that they are right. As is so often the case, the forms of misbehavior people find cropping up in their midst are exactly those about which they are most sensitive. The use of alcohol, always a sensitive problem in Appalachian society, has apparently increased, and there are rumors everywhere that drugs have found their way into the valley. The theft rate has also gone up, and theft has always been viewed in the mountains as a sure index of social disorganization. The cruelest cut of all, however, is that younger people seem to be slipping away from parental control and are becoming involved in nameless delinquencies. This is an extremely disturbing development in a culture so devoted to the family and so concerned about generational continuity.

This apparent collapse of conventional morality has a number of curious aspects. For one thing, observers generally feel that there is much less deviation from community norms than the local people seem to fear. Moreover, there is an interesting incongruity in these reports of immorality—one gets the impression that virtually everyone is coming into contact now with persons of lower moral stature than they did formerly. This, of and by itself, does not make very much logistical sense. One survivor said flatly,

The people of Buffalo Creek tended to group themselves together; therefore the breaking up of the old communities threw all kinds of different people together. At the risk of sounding superior, I feel we are living amidst people with lower moral values than us.

Perhaps this is true—but where did all these sordid people come from? Whatever else people may say about their new neighbors in the refugee camps, they are also from Buffalo Creek, and it is hard to avoid the suspicion that their perceived immorality has as much to do with their newness as with their actual behavior. It may be that relative strangers are almost by definition less “moral” than familiar neighbors. To live within a tightly knit community is to make allowances for behavior that might otherwise look deviant. New neighbors do not qualify for this clemency—not yet, at least—and to that extent, their very unfamiliarity may seem to hint at vice all by itself.

The collapse of morality in Buffalo Creek thus seems to have two edges. We have sufficient evidence to believe that certain forms of deviation are actually on the increase, although this is a difficult thing to measure accurately. However, we also have reason to believe that the breakdown of accustomed neighborhood patterns and the scattering of people into unfamiliar new groupings has increased the level of suspicion people feel toward one another.

DISORIENTATION

The people of Buffalo Creek are also clearly suffering from a prolonged sense of disorientation. It has often been noted that the survivors of a disaster are likely to be dazed and stunned, unable to locate themselves meaningfully in time and space. Time seems to stop for them; places and objects suddenly seem transitory. They have trouble finding stable points of reference in the surrounding terrain, both physical and human, to help fix their position and orient their behavior. All of this can be understood as a natural consequence of shock, but the people of Buffalo Creek seem to have continued to experience this sense of dislocation for months and even years after the crisis. "We find ourselves standing, not knowing exactly which way to go or where to turn," said one individual. Another survivor noted, "We feel like we're living in a strange and different place, even though it is just a few miles up Buffalo Creek from where we were."

Professional observers who have gone into the valley on medical or research errands have noted repeatedly how frequently the survivors seem to forget simple bits of everyday information—the names of close friends, their own telephone numbers, etc. People are often unable to locate themselves spatially, even when they are staring at fixed landmarks they have known all their lives. It is not at all uncommon for them to answer factual questions about time—their own age or their children's grade in school—as if history had indeed stopped on the date of the disaster. In general, people all over the valley live with a lasting sense of being out of place, disconnected, and torn loose from their moorings, and this feeling has far outlasted the initial trauma of the catastrophe itself.

People normally learn who they are and where they are by taking soundings from their fellows. As if employing a subtle form of radar, we probe other people in our immediate environment with looks, gestures, and words, hoping to learn something about ourselves from the signals we get in return. But when there are no reliable objects off of whom to bounce those exploratory probes, people have a hard time calculating where they stand in relation to the rest of the world. In a very real sense, they come to feel that they are not whole persons, not entirely human, because they do not know how to position themselves in a larger communal setting.

Well, I just don't feel like the same person. I feel like I live in a different world. I don't have no home no more. I don't feel normal anymore. I mean, sometimes I just wonder if I'm a human being. I just feel like I don't have no friends in the world, nobody cares for me, nobody knows I even exist.

LOSS OF CONNECTION

A third manifestation of the disaster's psychosocial effects is a condition that might be described as loss of

connection—a sense of separation from other people. For better or worse, the people of the hollow were deeply enmeshed in the tissues of their community; they drew their very being from them. When those tissues were stripped away by the disaster, people found themselves exposed and alone, suddenly dependent on their personal resources. The cruel fact is that many of the survivors proved to have few resources—not because they lacked the heart or the competence, but because they had spent so many years placing their abilities in the service of the larger community that they did not really know how to mobilize them for their own purposes.

Many people feel that they have lost meaningful connection with themselves. Much of their apparent former strength was actually the reflected strength of the community, and they are learning—to their very great discomfort—that they cannot maintain an enduring sense of self when separated from that larger tissue. They find that they are not very good at making individual decisions, getting along with others, or establishing themselves as separate persons in the absence of a supportive surround. "Lonesome" is a word many of them use, and they do not use it to mean the lack of human company. One woman who has moved to the center of a large neighboring town said of her new home: "It is like being all alone in the middle of a desert." A man who continued to live in his damaged home on Buffalo Creek said,

Well, there is a difference in my condition. Like somebody being in a strange world with nobody around. You don't know nobody. You walk the floor or look for somebody you know to talk to, and you don't have nobody.

In addition, the inability of people to come to terms with their own individual isolation is counterpointed by an inability to relate to others on a one-to-one basis. Human relations along Buffalo Creek took their shape from the expectations that pressed in on them from all sides like a mold: they were regulated by the customs of the neighborhood, the ways of the community, and the traditions of the family. When that mold was stripped away, long-standing relationships seemed to disintegrate. This is true of everyday acquaintances, but it is doubly—and painfully—true of marriages. Wives and husbands discovered that they did not know how to nourish one another, make decisions, or even to engage in satisfactory conversations when the community was no longer there to provide a context and set a rhythm. There has been a sharp increase in the divorce rate, but that statistical index does not begin to express the difficulties the survivors have relating to their spouses. It is almost as if communal forces of one sort or another had knit family groups together by holding them in a kind of gravitational field, but when the forces of that field began to dissipate, family members became scattered like aimless individual particles. Each individual nurses his or her own hurts and tends to his or her own business. They

do not know how to care for one another or to coordinate emotionally, because the context that lent substance and meaning to their relationships has disappeared. Two survivors put it this way:

Each person in the family is a loner now, a person alone. Each of us is fighting his own battles. We just don't seem to care for each other anymore.

The family is not what they was. They're not the same people. I don't know how you'd put this, but before there was love in the home. But now it seems like each one is a different person, an individual by himself or herself, and there's just nothing there.

Finally, the difficulty people experience in sustaining warm relationships extends beyond marriages and families, out into the rest of the valley. In places like Buffalo Creek, relationships are part of the natural order—being inherited by birth or acquired by physical proximity—and the very idea of “making” friends or “forming” relationships is hard for these people to understand and harder still for them to achieve.

One result of all the problems I have described is that the community (what remains of it) seems to have lost its most significant quality—the power it gave people to care for one another in moments of need, to console one another in moments of distress, and to protect one another in moments of danger. In retrospect,

it is apparent that the community was indeed stronger than the sum of its parts in this regard. When the people of Buffalo Creek were clustered together in the embrace of a community, they were capable of remarkable acts of generosity; when they tried to relate to one another as separate individuals, they found that they could no longer mobilize the energy to care. One woman summed it up in a phrase: “It seems like the caring part of our lives is gone.”

CONCLUSIONS

To end with an oversimplified metaphor, I would suggest that the people of Buffalo Creek were accustomed to placing their individual energies and resources at the disposal of the larger collectivity—the communal store, as it were—and then drawing on those reserves when the demands of everyday life made this necessary. When the community more or less disappeared, as it did after the disaster, people found that they could not take advantage of the energies they once invested in that communal store. They found themselves almost empty of feeling, devoid of affection, and lacking all confidence and assurance. It is as if the cells had supplied raw energy to the whole body but did not have the means to convert that energy into usable personal resources once the body was no longer there to process it.